

Marita Bonner: Writer and Teacher

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When people think about all things African-Americans went through during the Harlem Renaissance, no one tends to think about the women and what they went through. No one writes about this better than Marita Bonner. How did Marita Bonner's teaching and writing affect Illinois history?

Marita Bonner was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, on June 16, 1898. She attended Brookline High School and she belonged to many clubs, but the English Club and the Music Club were most important to her. She was an excellent pianist and she was also chosen to attend Charles T. Copeland's writing seminar. It turned out that one of her sketches, "Dandelion Season", had been selected to be read to the Radcliffe classes. As a senior at Radcliffe she also taught at the Cambridge High School and graduated in 1922. After graduation she taught at Bluefield Colored Institute, Bluefield, Virginia and then she taught at the Armstrong High School.

After moving to Washington, D.C., she then met her husband, William Almy Occomy. They married and then moved to Chicago. That is when her writing career really started. She wrote her first essay, "On Being Young-A Women-And Colored," and got it published in the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* in December 1925. This essay dealt with the different conditions the African-Americans, especially the women, had to go through and the weight of oppression on black females. She also argued against racism and sexism in this essay. Along with writing essays she also wrote numerous short stories. One of her first ones was "The Hands- A Story." It was published in the *Opportunity* in

August 1925. Along with essays and short stories she also produced three plays, “Pot Maker,” “The Purple Flower,” and the “Exit, an Illusion.” Her most popular one was “The Purple Flower.”

For writing the essay “On Being Young-A Women-and Colored” she won a prize. She also won the Wanamaker music prize for Negro Music in 1927. She continued publishing short stories until 1941. After that she taught handicapped children in the 1940s and then retired in 1963. She finally passed away in Chicago on December 6, 1971, from smoke inhalation complications after her apartment caught fire.

In conclusion, Marita Bonner made a difference in Illinois history by teaching and writing. It was all because of her writing the essays, short stories, and plays. Because she wrote these things people really started to take more interest in her short stories. Some examples of people’s interest were they saw her plays, read her stories and essays, and possibly had her as a teacher or heard about her teachings. Marita Bonner had a deep passion for African-American women’s rights and what they had to go through. If it were not for Marita Bonner, the life for the women in the Harlem Renaissance would have been very different. With all the things Marita Bonner did she probably changed many women and young girl’s lives and their views on life. [From Perspectives in American Literature, “Marita Bonner: A Brief Biography,”

<www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap9/bonner.html> (Sept. 14, 2008); Monica White, “On Being Young-A Women-and Colored,”

<www.uah.edu/womensstudies/aaww/bonner.htm> (Sept. 14, 2008); Harvard University Library, “A Finding Aid,” <www.oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch01097> (Sept.

14, 2008); and VG: Artist Biography, “Marita Odette Bonner: Biography/Criticism,”

<www.voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/bonner_marita_odette.html> (Sept. 14, 2008).]